



External Assessment Contingency Planning

Version 1.2 – November 2021

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Version control

Update history

Update history – Version 1.2 November 2021

- Further considerations and mitigations added to situation plan
- Addition of consideration matrix
- Wording added to confirm centres must create and update a contingency plan for external assessment disruption
- Updates to latest Functional Skills offer, including reference to remote invigilation
- General formatting and structure amends.

External assessment contingency planning

Introduction

NCFE offers a number of qualifications which include an externally assessed component, many of which must be completed on a set date and time or within an assessment window, determined by NCFE.

This publication offers guidance on the contingency planning centres must carry out in advance of any external assessment to mitigate the impact of any potential disruption, and the steps NCFE may consider to minimise impact on learners.

Within this guidance, examples of disruption to consider includes, but is not limited to:

- Criminal activity (for example, bomb threat or cyber-attack)
- Supply shortages (for example, transport issues)
- Significant damage to centre property (for example, fire)
- Severe weather (for example, flooding)
- Public health incidents (for example, flu pandemic)
- Incidents within the local community
- Serious injury to a learner or member of staff.

Centre responsibilities

Centres must prepare for possible disruptions to external assessments. Planning must include creating, reviewing, and maintaining an external assessment contingency plan, and ensuring all staff members are aware of this plan.

When drafting contingency plans, centres should consider the following guidance:

- [Emergency planning and response](#) from the Department for Education (DfE)
- [What schools, colleges and other centres should do if exams or other assessments are seriously disrupted](#) by the DfE
- [Preparing for disruption to examinations](#) from the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ).

Wider communication

In the event of widespread local or national disruption, centres should look for timely information shared by the regulators in England ([Ofqual](#)), Wales ([Qualifications Wales](#)), and Northern Ireland ([CCEA Regulation](#)), as well as the relevant governmental departments in [England](#), [Wales](#), and [Northern Ireland](#). Centres must also ensure they are monitoring other relevant local and national agencies, as well as any communication shared by NCFE.

Centres must also ensure they are communicating in a timely manner with learners, guardians and carers on any changes to the assessment venue, timetable, or other details, and must also ensure they are communicating with NCFE as required regarding changes.

Unless instructed otherwise, any contingency plan **must** aim to ensure that an external assessment can go ahead wherever possible, with particular attention given to learners whose progression would be impacted should they be unable to complete the assessment as planned.

Centre contingency planning and response

The aim of a contingency plan is to help centre staff respond effectively to an emergency, covering a range of potential incidents that could occur. Contingency plans should include procedures for determining whether an emergency has occurred, and when to activate the plan in response to an emergency. This should include identifying an appropriately trained person who will take the decision, in consultation with others, on when an emergency has occurred.

Preparing for emergencies is an ongoing process; once a contingency plan has been prepared, it must be maintained and reviewed on a regular basis to ensure it remains up to date and fit for purpose. Please be aware that NCFE will request to see evidence of a centre's external assessment contingency plan to prepare for any disruption during an assessment audit visit, and this must be provided upon request.

A centre contingency planning document(s) should prepare for situations that may impact an external assessment, such as those outlined in the table below:

Situation	Considerations and possible mitigations
<p>Staffing emergencies <i>e.g. Invigilator or Learning Support Assistant unable to fulfil their duties in an external assessment</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you have other trained members of staff within your centre who could support at short notice? Do you have access to a wider pool of trained invigilators or support assistants through links with other centres in the area? Could they support at short notice?
<p>Issues with the assessment room, site, or location <i>e.g. assessment room unexpectedly unavailable</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What other rooms within your centre are suitable for an external assessment? Do you have access to any other suitable locations nearby? How will you maintain assessment material security and integrity if using a different assessment room? Where issues cannot be avoided, prioritise learners whose progression would be limited should they be unable to complete the assessment.

<p>Medical emergencies during an external assessment <i>e.g. learner takes ill immediately before or during the assessment</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do invigilators know who to contact, when, and how? • How will you ensure the impact on other learners is minimised?
<p>Severe weather conditions <i>e.g. heavy snow or flooding which impacts learners and/or centre</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have a plan for late admission to an assessment if a learner is delayed? • How will you mitigate the potential impact if there are transportation issues for learners? • How will you ensure the integrity of the external assessment is maintained? • What is your communication plan in instances of severe weather? • Are you aware of the options available to centres within the NCFE regulations such as altering start times of external assessments?
<p>Public health incidents <i>e.g. a flu pandemic</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How might this impact your learners and planned external assessments? • What mitigating steps can you take to minimise the potential impact in advance?
<p>Centre closure <i>e.g. a localised threat or extreme circumstance which leaves the centre buildings inaccessible</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your contingency if your centre needs to close unexpectedly? • How far ahead do you plan for upcoming external assessments in order to mitigate disruption? • What is your communication plan should your centre close? • Is there a nearby alternative location which could be used for external assessments? • How will you ensure assessment papers are stored and moved securely if needed?

Consideration matrix

Centres may wish to consider the following options available to them, depending on the scenario or disruption they face, which can support with understanding the possible options available from NCFE.

	Set date and time assessment	Windowed assessment	On-demand assessment
Negligible disruption Slight disruption that does not impact the assessment	Continue assessment as scheduled.	Continue assessment as scheduled.	Continue assessment as scheduled.
Minor disruption A slight disruption impacting a single, or small group of learners	Consider a delay to the start time of the assessment by up to 30 mins.	Consider a delay to the centre scheduled session or rescheduling within the allowed assessment window.	Continue assessment as scheduled, with option to flex start time until learners arrive.
Moderate disruption A modest disruption that impacts several learners or centres	Continue the assessment where possible. Consider a delay to the start time of the assessment, or if known in advance, consider an Assessment Variation Request . Learners may be eligible for a Special Consideration if the disruption is within scope.	Continue the assessment where possible. Consider rescheduling the centre scheduled session to later within the allowed assessment window. If this is not possible, consider an Assessment Variation Request . Learners may be eligible for a Special Consideration if the disruption is within scope.	Continue assessment as scheduled, with flexibility to start time until learners arrive.
Major disruption A regional disruption that impacts multiple learners and centres	Continue the assessment where possible. Consider a delay to the start time of the assessment, or if known in advance, consider an Assessment Variation Request . Learners may be eligible for a Special Consideration if the disruption is within scope.	Continue the assessment where possible. Consider rescheduling the centre scheduled session to later within the allowed assessment window. If this is not possible, consider an Assessment Variation Request . Learners may be eligible for a Special	Consider cancelling and rebooking assessments for a later date. Look for further instruction from government, regulators, and NCFE.

	Look for further instruction from government, regulators, and NCFE.	<p>Consideration if the disruption is within scope.</p> <p>Look for further instruction from government, regulators, and NCFE.</p>	
<p>Severe disruption Significant national disruption, impacting all learners and centres</p>	Await further instruction from government, regulators, and NCFE.	Await further instruction from government, regulators, and NCFE.	Consider cancelling and rebooking assessments for a later date, and await further instruction from government, regulators, and NCFE.

NCFE's responsibilities

Alongside the contingency planning centres must carry out, NCFE also takes steps to mitigate against unexpected disruption which may impact learners completing external assessments.

All contingencies applied will always be selected based on the context and circumstances of the disruption, such as whether national or localised. Depending on the scale of the issue, NCFE may invoke contingencies on behalf of its centres, particularly in responses to widespread disruption at a regional or national level. The contingencies NCFE invokes will be decided on a case-by-case basis, with the focus on minimising disadvantage to learners whilst maintaining the integrity of external assessments.

Set date and time, and assessment windowed external assessments

There are three main potential actions NCFE may take if notified of severe disruption affecting multiple centres and learners on a set date and time or windowed external assessment (i.e. those completed on a date and time, or within a set period, as defined by NCFE).

Reschedule the external assessment using the same assessment paper.

This would be considered under the following circumstances:

- There are very few centres with bookings on the assessment
- All centres with bookings are impacted
- The assessment papers have not yet been dispatched
- There is time within the external assessment timetable to reschedule the assessment¹.

¹ Where the assessment is timetabled with an assessment window, NCFE would also consider allowing an extension to the assessment window in cases of severe disruption or emergency

In such cases, NCFE will work with affected centres to agree on alternative dates for the external assessment. Wherever possible, all affected centres would be expected to complete the external assessment on the same rescheduled date.

2. Schedule additional external assessment date with a different assessment paper.

This would only be considered under the following circumstances:

- Some centres have already completed the external assessment on the published date and time
- There are no other assessment opportunities available to the learners
- The affected learners would be significantly disadvantaged if an additional assessment paper was not provided.

Please note: this would only be considered in **truly exceptional cases** of widespread national disruption or emergency affecting significant numbers of centres and learners across the country.

3. Take no action.

There may be occasions where it is not possible or feasible for NCFE to reschedule an external assessment. In these cases, centres should ensure they have exhausted all alternative options available and look to make bookings at the next available opportunity.

On-demand external assessments

In case of severe disruption or an emergency affecting delivery of an on-demand external assessment (i.e. those completed at a date and time of a centre's choosing), it is expected that centres would reschedule to a more appropriate time for their learners.

Assessments booked on the NCFE online assessment platform, including those eligible for remote invigilation, can be cancelled and rescheduled if required. Paper-based on-demand assessment, such as the NCFE Functional Skills paper-based offer, operates a flexible entry process whereby a centre may postpone the assessment for up to 24 hours, if the booking relates to a single learner or the postponement affects

every learner on the booking. If the disruption or emergency cannot be overcome within this timeframe, the Functional Skills paper-based external assessment must be cancelled and rescheduled for a different date and time.

Remote invigilation, available for many on-demand, online external assessments, is a flexible and supportive option available to centres which should also be considered in instances of disruption to online or paper-based on-demand assessments, where applicable. For further information on remote invigilation, [please follow this link](#).

In cases of severe disruption to NCFE's process (such as cyber-attacks or severe weather), all affected bookings will be refunded and re-booked at the first available opportunity.

Other mitigations available

Alongside the wider options NCFE may consider, there are also the following standard processes available to a centre to support with disruption mitigation.

Assessment variations and alternative arrangements

As detailed in the NCFE [Regulations for the Conduct of External Assessment](#), for assessments with published start times, centres are authorised to start assessments by up to 30 minutes earlier than, or later than, the published starting time without the requirement to submit an assessment variation request for approval.

If the amendment to time is greater than 30 minutes, prior approval must be agreed. Centres may request a variation which will be reviewed by the Assessment Delivery team on a case-by-case basis.

Centres may [request an assessment variation](#) when they would like to:

- Vary the published assessment date or start time, beyond the allowed 30 mins
- Change the assessment site from the approved location to an alternative site.

If, following the receipt of an assessment variation request, agreement is given to allow the learner(s) to sit the external assessment on an alternative day, then JCQ arrangements apply and the centre must arrange suitable supervision of the learner(s).

On the day of a set date and time external assessment, if learners are unable to get to the assessment location due to travel disruption, or the centre being closed, wherever possible centres must investigate if another suitable venue is available. Where this is not possible, consideration should be given as to whether the learner(s) can be entered for the next available external assessment as detailed in the [External Assessment Timetable](#).

In the event of national or significant local disruption to external assessments, NCFE will liaise with qualification regulators and government departments to agree the most suitable option for managing the impact. As a last resort, affected external assessments will be rescheduled and centres will be informed.

Special consideration

Where all viable alternative options have been considered in cases of severe disruption, but a learner has been severely disrupted or unable to complete a timetabled external assessment, centres may wish to consider reviewing the NCFE Special Consideration policy and submitting an application [using the form available here](#).

All special considerations must be submitted no later than 7 working days following the originally timetabled assessment date.

Adaptations for 2021-22

The NCFE approach to awarding in 2021-22, as part of the ongoing response to the Covid-19 pandemic, includes adaptations made given the flexibilities afforded by the Ofqual VCRF Regulatory Framework and includes further detail relating to external assessments. For full details, [please follow this link](#).

Contact us

Please contact the Assessment Delivery team on assessmentdelivery@ncfe.org.uk with queries relating to the content of this document.

Alternatively, centres can:

- Subscribe to the regular centre In the Loop newsletter
- Visit the [Approach to Awarding hub](#)
- Contact the NCFE Customer Support team on 0191 239 8000, customersupport@ncfe.org.uk, or via live chat on ncfe.org.uk
- Contact their account manager or External Quality Assurer (EQA).